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Marking the liminal for true blue Aussies:

the generic placement of Aboriginality in Australian soap operas.

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Abstract

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This paper addresses a previously unconsidered history — that of Aboriginal characters in Australian soap operas. Rejecting critical approaches which have obtained even into the 1990s, it refuses to judge these characters as 'good' or 'bad' manifestations of indigeneity. Rather, using the idea that genre is a way of closing down interpretive possibilities, the paper looks at the manner in which generic expectations around soap operas produce particular valences for these representations of Aboriginality. It points to the many ways in which these indigenous characters are insistently constructed as liminal in soap operas' structural communities - simultaneously inside and outside of the group. This is seen to accord with the suggestions of Jakubowicz et al about the ways in which Aboriginal people are positioned by wider social discourses.

Marking the liminal for true blue Aussies:

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Introduction

The soap opera *A Country Practice* features an Aboriginal character named Trevor Jackson (Michael Watson). He is a park ranger. Appearing regularly on the program, he is established as part of the community; but due to his job, the character is often associated with nature. How is this fact to be interpreted?

Should it be understood as perpetuating a stereotype? Is putting Aboriginality into the wildlife park tantamount to denying indigenous Australians the possibility of entering and engaging with urban lifestyles? Or should this representation rather be celebrated? Is it in fact insisting that Aboriginal people can keep a certain connection with their past, and with the place of nature in cultural traditions, even while they deal with settler culture?

The fact that this question is unanswerable has not stopped film and television academics from answering it — or at least, answering similar versions of it. This paper starts from precisely this impasse — that which is produced by the application of good/bad terminology to the discussion of Aboriginal representations in Australian film and television. Despite assertions that the practice of media criticism in Australia has matured beyond the desire for

'positive' and 'negative' images (Moore and Muecke, 1984: 37; Langton, 1993: 41; Jennings, 1993: 10), the dominant tone of much writing in this area has remained resolutely judgmental (see, for example, Brown, 1988: 483; Turner, 1988: 140; Hickling-Hudson, 1990: 266, 267; Hodge and Mishra, 1991: 64; Langton, 1993: 47; and so on). This Aboriginal representation is bad, says academic writing, because it shows stereotyped Aboriginal characteristics; this one is bad, because it denies the specificity of Aboriginal cultural traditions. This one is bad because it is assimilationist; this one bad because it is essentialist.

In the face of a critical situation where it is all too easy to insist on the most unfortunate interpretations of any conceivable representation, this paper attempts to shift the argument to a different register: away from the prescriptive judgement of what *should* be to what David Bordwell has called a 'historical poetics' (1989); a writing of texts back into the discursive situations from which they emerge. This paper works with a previously unwritten history — that of Aboriginal characters in Australian soap operas. It interprets these representations not in terms of unreachable levels of the ideal image of Aboriginality, but rather through the interpretive schema which are offered to viewers by the genre in which they appear. Rather than using Bordwell's historical poetics to attempt to present actual readings of the films by historically precise individuals, this work suggests one way in which contemporary generic frameworks will contribute towards audiences making sense of Aboriginal characters in these programs — in the case of Trevor, how his placement in a soap opera contributes towards the interpretations of his character which are promoted.

The genre of Australian soap: interpretation by 'community'.

It is unsurprising to suggest that genres function to help stabilise interpretations of media texts (Kent, 1985: 134; White, 1985: 41; Cohen, 1986: 210; Feuer, 1987: 119; Bennett and Woollacott, 1987: 81; Neale, 1990: 46; Moon, 1992: 58-59). Genres are not, after all, static collections of texts, but:

> institutions or social contracts ... whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artefact ... [texts] must be continually re-placed by conventions if the text in question is not to be abandoned to a drifting multiplicity of uses ... [genre] is the exclusion of undesirable responses (Jameson, 1981: 106-107).

How do the expectations mobilised by audiences approaching Australian soap operas facilitate interpretations of Aboriginal characters in these programs?

Despite the consistent popularity of soap operas and other drama serials on broadcast television, the place of Aboriginality in these forms has been little addressed by critical literature. Any discussion of Aboriginal presence tends to take the form of a fleeting sentence suggesting that Aboriginality in the soaps is characterised largely by absence (Dowmunt, 1991: 40; Jakubowicz [ed], 1994: 57; Molnar, 1994: 19). And it is certainly true that in comparison to the vast number of characters appearing on television drama serials, a disproportionately small number are of anything other than Anglo-Celtic descent. It is easy to provide a list of Australian soap operas, from *The Box* (Crawfords for Channel Ten, 1974-1977) to *Echo Point* (Southern Star for Channel Ten, 1995) which never featured an Aboriginal character in a speaking role. However, a history does exist: and Aboriginal characters are to be found in *Number 96* (Cash Harmon, for Channel Ten, 1972-1978) *Prisoner* (Grundy for Channel Ten, 1979-1986); *A Country Practice* (JNP for Channel Seven, 1981-1993, for Channel Ten, 1994); *Neighbours* (Grundy for Channel Seven, 1985, for Channel Ten 1985-); *The Flying Doctors* (Crawfords for Channel Nine, 1986-1992); *Home and Away* (Channel Seven, 1988-); *GP* (ABC, 1989-); and *Sweat* (Southern Star for Channel Ten, 1996-). It should be noted in passing that to name these programs 'soap operas' is to partake in a process of generic alignment by textual features that does not entirely line up with the program-makers' own understanding of their work (Best, 1993; Samuelenok, 1993). However, for the purposes of this work, the pertinent fact is that these programs are discursively circulated as soaps (see, for example, Lawrence, 1994).

The work of Christine Geraghty (1991) on the textual organisation of soap operas suggests that the fact of large central casts promotes certain readings of characters in these programs. These groups of characters are soap opera's 'communities', with all of the implications of exclusion and inclusion implied by that word. Australian soaps often make explicit the importance of community; in assertions that 'Everybody needs good neighbours'; in a celebration at the Coopers Crossing pub (*Flying Doctors*); or in the socially-responsible attitude of Pippa as she offers a home to foster children (*Home and Away*).

Geraghty suggests that the community formed by the regular characters in soap operas is continually in negotiation, viewers continually asking who is to be admitted and who excluded from the social framework. The boundaries of the community group are marked and re-marked in the repeated placing of some characters outside the central community:

> The community in soaps...is a structure in which the setting and the past provide the framework and the family provides the model for relationships. It depends on notions of mutual support and acceptance and defines itself in terms of its differences from the rest of

> the world. But the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' are not always clear, and many soap stories are concerned with the difficulties of marking them out. One further strategy in creating a sense of community is to exclude those who do not belong, and to clarify the difference between those inside the community and those outside it (Geraghty: 1991: 100).

Most interesting, for the purposes of this work, are the comments she then goes on to make in relation to liminal characters — those characters in whose presentation there is a play between acceptance by the group, and rejection as an unacceptable Other:

> [T]he division between the inside and the outside is not always ... clear. Many characters hover on the boundaries, moving between acceptance and rejection as the situation demands ... (Geraghty, 1991: 101).

Geraghty's examples are roles such as the 'gossip', the 'bastard' and the 'tart' (Geraghty, 1991: 101). However, it seems that this concept of liminal characters, involved in a constant play of exclusion and inclusion from the serial community, may also prove to be a useful one for interrogating Australian drama serial representation of Aboriginality. The very word 'community' is a potent one when discussing the formation of ideas of race. As Benedict Anderson's book puts it, nations are *Imagined Communities* (1983); the process by which nationalist and racist ideologies define a group as 'others' precisely involves an understanding of who is 'we' and who is 'not we' — that is, defining the limit of 'our' community. This paper suggests that for soap-literate viewers watching Australian television drama, the question of a character's place in the community will be an important interpretive approach to these texts.

The characters and the history

Aboriginal characters have appeared on soap operas for as long as the genre has been popular in Australia. Bob Maza recalls playing a lawyer in the ABC soap opera, *Bellbird* (ABC, 1967), a short-term character (Maza, 1993) who 'just happened to be Aboriginal' (Bostock, 1990: 13). From this start, Aboriginal characters have appeared in a variety of situations in a range of serials.

On *Number 96,* Justine Saunders is a hairdresser, on *Prisoner* she is a prison psychologist — while on the same show, Kylie Belling is a riotous Aboriginal prisoner. *A Country Practice* includes Ian Watson as a 'semi-regular' park ranger; as well as a range of other, shorter-term

characters who appear for only a few episodes each (Paul Williams as a boxer, Gary Foley as minister, Rachel Maza as a lawyer). *Home and Away* has Wesley Patten as 'Kevin' for three months, in episodes first broadcast in Australia in the latter half of 1993. *The Flying Doctors* features Kylie Belling as a regular character for one season, and Warren Owens as a returning, irregular character; it has also provided opportunities for a range of single episode Aboriginal characters (Gary Foley as a troublesome father, Kristine Nehm as an expectant woman, Ernie Dingo as a father caught between two worlds). *GP* allows a few characters to appear in single episodes addressing Aboriginality — one case of reverse racism, one Aboriginal criminal, Ernie Dingo as an Aboriginal medical student caught between two cultures [again] — and some characters played by Aboriginal actors where race is not an issue. In *Neighbours*, Aboriginality occurs as a plot point when a young girl must deal with a cursed rock from Uluru; and later, in a more material form, as the character Sally Pritchard (Brenda Webb) comes to terms with her Aboriginal identity. On *Sweat*, Heath Bergerson plays Stewie Perkins, a young athlete in training for the Olympics.

How are these Aboriginal characters placed in relation to the generically vital communities of these programs? A variety of textual factors contribute to the production of the group status of all characters in soap operas.

Factor one: title sequences

The title sequences of Australian television serials are important sources of information about community. Following American rather than British examples, the opening credits of many programs immediately establish those cast members who are to be the important members of the community, even before the narrative opens. If a character appears in the title credits, then that character is quickly marked as regular, familiar, and playing a large part in the community.

In the case of *A Country Practice*, the characters and the actors are presumed to be so familiar that no character, nor actor names are presented over the opening shots; but this is an unusually presumptuous approach to the familiarity of the central characters. Most programs (*GP, Neighbours, Home and Away, The Flying Doctors*) present the faces of regular cast members along with the actor's (and perhaps the character's) name.

The only Australian television soap to have allowed an Aboriginal characters a role in the title sequence is 1996's *Sweat* (the short lived *Bony* [Grundy for Channel Seven, 1992]

offered Burnum Burnum the same opportunity for the police series). However, the history of Aboriginal characters is largely one of exclusion from this semiotic domain. Even when Kylie Belling is playing the regular character 'Sharon' in the first season of *The Flying Doctors*, the title sequence features only flying and medical personnel. As a non-medical ground worker, Sharon is relegated to the secondary status of the townspeople. Similarly, in those episodes of *Home and Away* where Wesley Patten plays the character of Kevin (five times a week for three months), there is no space in the titles for his character. He is relegated to secondary status and credited at the end of the program — alongside incidental, single-line characters. Indeed, if these end credits are truncated (as often happened in the British broadcasts of the programme), he is not credited at all. Neither Justine Saunders nor Kylie Belling ever made it to the (admittedly, stunted) titles of *Prisoner*; Michael Watson was not given a place in *A Country Practice*; and Sally was not enough of a regular to feature at the start of *Neighbours*.

Through the defined community of the opening titles, Aboriginal characters have overwhelmingly been excluded from central positions in Australian drama serials.

Factor two: in/finite narratives

It is unusual for central characters in soap operas to be associated with only a single storyline over the course of their involvement with a program. Part of the logic of soaps, as continuing (serial) drama, is the possibility of endless regeneration — the continual emergence of new storylines. By contrast, characters external to the central soap opera community often appear only for very short periods of time — they deal with a single 'problem' before leaving the central space of the program to go back to the vague 'elsewhere' that exists outside the bounds of the community (in *Neighbours*, for example, this is usually Brisbane). Rachel Maza in *A Country Practice* (eight episodes), Justine Saunders (eleven) and Kylie Belling (nine) in *Prisoner*, and even Kevin (three months) in *Home and Away* tend to be associated with single, specific narratives being worked out. In *Home and Away*, Kevin must decide whether to leave his family to pursue a training in art; in *A Country Practice*, Ruth falls in love and decides to marry the white Chris; in *Prisoner*, Sarah's violent behaviour must be traced back to difficulties with her foster parents, and the iniquity of the assimilation system. In a variation on the same idea, when Sally falls in love in *Neighbours*, she marries and promptly leaves the program. For central soap characters, marriages are typically the occasion of many new narratives emerging — not of closure and disappearance. The use of

such finite storylines marks the Aboriginal characters as unmistakably not-central to the community of these soaps.

A similar effect is produced by the use of 'semi-regular' characters. This term is used by Susan Bower, of *A Country Practice* to describe Trevor Jackson (Ian Watson), the park ranger in that programme. He and Dougie Kennedy (Warren Owens) in *The Flying Doctors*, play characters which occur repeatedly, over a period of time, but are not in every — or even many — episodes. Once again, this is unusual in soap operas, and these characters are not fully accepted into the community. The very fact of their irregularity works against reading them as familiar, comfortable and predictable characters.

Factor three: romance

As John Caughie suggests, regular viewers of a television program make interpretations of episodes explicitly in terms of other episodes of that program. There are, in short, generic expectations for each individual show (Caughie, 1991: 135).

For example, in many of these serial dramas romance is a norm. Across the spectrum of programs here under consideration, romance is more or less foregrounded as an expected narrative component. In *Home and Away*, and on *Neighbours*, most characters will be involved in some form of romantic plot on a regular basis. By contrast, in *A Country Practice*, *The Flying Doctors* or *GP*, where casts are smaller, romance is more selective and more serious, leading either to marriage or broken hearts. *Prisoner* represents a fascinating confirmation of this generic rule: although set in an all-woman gaol, romance plots are made possible through male warders, male characters outside the prison, and even the possibility of lesbian relationships.

In such a context, the dearth of romantic plots for Aboriginal actors in soaps works to mark their characters as excluded from the central concerns of the community. Characters might be introduced specifically to play out romance plots (Kristina Nehm and Michael Watson in *The Flying Doctors*, for example, or Rachel Maza in *A Country Practice*), but there is little of the long term interest and extended period of problematic disruption which typically characterises serial romance.

The most complex accounts of the refusal of this generic norm can be found in the two longest running serial characters — Wesley Patten in *Home and Away* and Kylie Belling in

The Flying Doctors. In the former instance, *Home and Away* is, beside *Neighbours*, one of the most insistently romance-oriented serials. In those episodes featuring Patten's character, there are seventeen other regular characters. Most of these are either involved in relationships, actively trying to get involved in relationships, breaking up, or married. Despite this setting, in the course of three months there is at no point any suggestion of romantic involvement for Kevin. He forms close friendships with girls and women (Angel and Roxanne), but is not in love with anyone. No-one is in love with him. He evinces no interest in the romantic side of things. No character comments on his singleness: and it is not even presented as an issue. Romance is not, in three months of the program, ever related to Kevin.

However, the most delicate example of the footwork which can be employed in allowing an Aboriginal character into a romantic community — while simultaneously denying full entry — can be seen in the case of Kylie Belling's period as 'Sharon' in the first season of *The Flying Doctors*. In this program, there is a hint of a romance between Sharon and the character of 'Dave' (the *Flying Doctor*s' pilot during this season). But this romance is textually ambivalent. During the first thirteen episodes of the season, the characters become friendly, involving themselves in confidential chats and walking together between plot sites. At first, there is no suggestion that romance is involved; and (in these television serials at least) it is not unusual for men and women to be 'just friends'. However, in episode fourteen, 'Departures', the plot noticeably changes tack. Sharon has decided to leave Cooper's Crossing to make a career in the city. According to Crawfords' production notes for this episode: 'Everyone is stunned, including Gibson, who has become very fond of her. A romantic interlude evolves which reveals the expression of difficult emotions'. This might seem quite explicit. But in the text of the programme, it is less so.

When Sharon (Kylie's character) announces her departure, editing and performance suggest that Dave ('Gibson') is particularly upset by this news: she says that she has a place on a Social Welfare course in Sydney, and there is a reaction shot of Dave, looking upset at the idea — eyebrows furrowed and mouth hard. Sharon looks around the group, smiling. However, when her glance falls on Dave, her expression changes to one of concern. Dave says — his performance one of unconvincing bravado — 'We've got some celebrating to do', before another shot shows Sharon biting her lip. This scene in itself suggests a strange relationship. They are not close enough to have discussed this move before Sharon announces it publicly: and they are not close enough for Dave's reaction to be one of anger (that is, there is obviously no commitment between them). But each is aware of the difficulty Sharon's announcement causes for the other.

In the next scene, Chris and Sharon are walking towards the pub to celebrate. As Dave enters in the background of the shot, and calls out 'Sharon', Chris says to Sharon, 'I'll see you in the pub', leaving the shot and the two of them together. As this suggests that Chris is aware of Sharon's feelings for Dave, it is even more noticeable that there is no other discussion of this situation between Chris and Sharon at any point in the first season.

When Sharon and Dave are left alone, an awkward scene ensues where neither is explicit in declaring feelings — 'Are you angry at me?'; 'No. It's what you've always wanted'.

Later in the episode, the couple have a moonlit scene on a bandstand — constructed with all the signifiers of romance (crickets sing in the background). As Sharon explains her decision to leave, Dave retorts angrily, 'We're supposed to be mates'. A strange dynamic is suggested by the use of such a stoic term. 'Mates' and 'mateship' are powerful and suggestive terms in the construction of Australian identity. The charge they carry is of strong but asexual bonding, usually between men — and the application of such a word to the relationship between Dave and Sharon certainly works to deromanticise it.

At the end of this scene, Dave invites Sharon back to his place. She comes, but he is then worried about what the neighbours will think. She asserts that there is nothing for the neighbours to think about, as there is nothing going on between them — no 'mucking around' — 'I just wanted something to eat'. They fight about this and she storms out.

The next day, there is a reconciliation scene. Both accept that they have behaved badly. The intimate reverse shots of their looks, and the piano music which plays in the background suggest romance or love. By contrast, the performances and dialogue, where he says 'Come on' and drags her off by an arm around her shoulder signal 'mateship' again — it is casual rather than gentle contact. This is the only physical contact between the two in these scenes. If there is any romance present, it is not signalled by anything as blatant as a kiss, for example.

This sets the tone for the relationship between them: involving many of the signifiers of romance, but insistently denying that romance is involved. This ambivalent relationship continues right up to David's untimely death. In the episode 'Into the Future', he crashes his aeroplane just after deciding to leave Cooper's Crossing. This event again leads to strangely non-committal reactions from Sharon. Non-verbal performance and codes of editing (big close ups at appropriate moments) establish the fact that Sharon has a particular concern for the welfare of this man; but that concern is never vocalised, nor acknowledged by any other member of the community.

Whether this ambivalent (lack of) romance was in fact the result of explicit network censorship of inter-racial romance (Alcorn, 1988: 5) is less important than the fact that it is textually unmistakable. For an audience aware of the generic propensity to ground characters in romance, such ambivalence marks quite clearly the liminal status of Kylie Belling's character.

Factor four: 'issues'

If romance is a generic norm in some soap operas, other drama serials promote expectations around 'issues'. There is a difference within the genre of serials in the extent to which resolvable, single-episode narratives will be foregrounded; and in the way in which readings should be made of these. A disproportionate number of the programs featuring Aboriginality have been those where 'series' narrative tendencies (towards single-episode narrative closure) are visible (Alvarado and Tulloch, 1983: 3). *GP*, *The Flying Doctors*, and *A Country Practice* each use separate titles for individual episodes, even though there are also continuing, 'serial' elements involving their central characters. The generic norm for each these programs is, to some degree, that each episode will deal with an 'issue'. These issues are most often associated directly with a character who is an outsider, not a regular member of the serial community, and who functions in the program purely as a bearer of that issue.

Several times in *GP*, Aboriginal characters play just this recognisable role; functioning as outsiders and as the bearers of issues. 'Beat it' deals with an Aboriginal criminal at a half-way house; 'Sloan Street' addresses reverse racism against a white doctor; 'Crossroads' features Ernie Dingo as an Aboriginal medical student worried about becoming too white; 'Special places' deals with racism in a country town. In another program which can deal with 'issues', *A Country Practice*, Paul Williams appears in one story as an Aboriginal boxer, dealing with issues of violence ('The Contender'). Similarly, in *The Flying Doctors*, quite apart from Sharon and Dougie, Aboriginality motivates a whole collection of issue narratives: about Land Rights ('Is nothing sacred'), the efficacy of Aboriginal medicine (‘The Forbidden'), and the massacre of Aborigines at time of settlement ('A Distant Echo') among others.

It may be that in the context of these programs, what is most important about their representations of Aboriginality is not so much the part the characters play in the single episode, as the fact that, in the wider context of *GP*, or *A Country Practice* as serials, it is known that such characters do appear only for a single episode; and explicitly function as

bearers of 'issues'. In the example of the *GP* episode 'Crossroads', for example, the representations of Aboriginality can easily be read in very positive ways. Julie, the *GP* secretary, visits her son in the country town where he is living. When there is nowhere in the town for Julie to stay, Aboriginal hospitality is emphasised as she is invited to stay with a friend of her son. The Aboriginal family, lead by the matriarch Dolly (Justine Saunders), is represented in a cheerful, upbeat way — having fun and mucking around. Eddie (Ernie Dingo), the local Aboriginal doctor around whom the narrative revolves, is shown to be competent doctor — 'It could be meningitis?' — 'There's no photophobia'. He is intelligent and incisive, presenting a voice of reason on Aboriginal social difficulties — 'The problem's not the grog...What you see is the blackfella getting drunk — but there's a lot of hurt you don't see'; 'It's called communications breakdown — when education is lacking, embarrassment sets in'. However, in the context of *GP*, it is apparent to audiences that Julie is the central character, and Aboriginality is the issue. Next week, the serial will show Julie, the other doctors, and Alzheimer's disease, or bulimia, or child abuse. The Aboriginal characters will not be seen again. Even if this particular episode does not privilege Julie's point of view — indeed, at one point her racism is made apparent as she assumes that Eddie is a nurse rather than a full doctor — a generically-literate audience are well aware that she is the regular, the familiar character. Ernie Dingo does not return to *GP*. He vanishes, along with his 'issue', after a single episode.

The single-episode Aboriginal 'issue' sometimes functions as presenting a challenge to the core soap community. For example, in *The Flying Doctors*' episode 'A Distant Echo', the single-episode Aboriginal visitor almost kills a regular character, and disrupts the whole sense of Cooper's Crossing community identity. Dave (Buddha Pryor) is a local Aboriginal university graduate. Studying local history, he reveals that Henry Cooper, the founder of the town and Violet Carnegie's great-grandfather, in fact led a massacre of local Aborigines. The episode then revolves around differing responses to this revelation. Again, the individual episode can be read as a sympathetic portrayal of Aboriginal concerns. Dave demands a monument recognising the Aboriginal dead, and in doing so, he is given lines which sound entirely reasonable — 'If we forget history, we're condemned to relive it'. He is supported by Emma, a central and regular community member: 'Now hang on', she argues in righteous indignation at the suggestion that the Aboriginal massacre should be covered up, 'Are we supposed to hide bits of our history?'.

However, the generic status of this narrative also argues against such sympathetic interpretations. Violet Carnegie, the town busybody (but also deeply loved by all in Cooper's Crossing) is thrown into shock by the fact that her great-grandfather was a mass murderer.

In fact, the shock is so great that she almost dies. Sam, the blonde-haired blue-eyed all-Australian spunk, very much a central character, makes clear that he blames Dave personally for this danger to the white woman, and angrily demands that Dave withdraw his allegations. Other central members of the community argue that Dave's demands are unreasonable, and a direct threat to the community and its history. Father Jackson, for example, claims that, 'If you don't forget the past, you can't get on with the future'; Vic, a generally likeable character and (as proprietor of the local bar) a structurally central character in this community, similarly argues that this past should be covered up for the good of the town. In such an ambivalent situation, the generic status of the program as a serial seems particularly important in understanding the limits which will be placed on meaning. Dave appears for only a single episode. He is an issue-bearing character. He is not part of the *Flying Doctors* community, and he brings a direct threat to the integrity of that community. Generically, he is an outsider and a disruptive element. In the space of the serial, his allegations seem open to interpretation less in terms of their necessary truth or untruth, than in relation to their potential damage to the white community.

Factor five: 'open' texts

Apart from the work involved in constructing understandings of community, another aspect of soap interpretation should be acknowledged. The narratives of soap operas are vast and ongoing. Meanings are always provisional, necessarily temporary. No judgement of a regular character is final, because the next episode may reveal new information.

Similarly, the vast and fragmented nature of soap texts means that characters can well be involved in a range of different activities over a period of time; and knowledges of previous incidents may well inflect readings of other episodes. Mrs Mangle in *Neighbours* may be behaving terribly, but a generically-aware viewer knows just how badly she has been treated by her husband, and may be more inclined to make sympathetic readings of her actions.

An acknowledgement of such generically-precise knowledges, formed over the huge texts that make up the run of a serial, is important when suggesting how Aboriginal characters are open to interpretation in these programs. In feature films and texts which are limited in their representation of Aboriginality, there is a much greater burden of representativeness. Should a character's Aboriginality be the focus of their representation or not? Should characters be, for example, a doctor who 'just happens to be' Aboriginal? Or should the character

necessarily become involved in issues of race and race relations? Both possibilities are open to undesired interpretations. As Stephen Muecke summarises the possibilities:

> Let's consider some options for Ernie Dingo as he goes to work for a soap opera like *A Country Practice* ... Does he come on as a doctor, without anyone making a fuss about his race? Then we are faced with spectre of *assimilation*. Does he come on as a drunk and unemployed? Then we are faced with the worse image of a (bad) *stereotype* (Muecke, 1992: 12).

But in fact, in a soap opera the options are not so clear cut. Any particular episode does not have to be so representative, because audiences interpret using knowledges gleaned from episodes taken from across the text of the series.

The examples of the 'semi-regular' characters of Trevor from *A Country Practice*, and Dougie from *The Flying Doctors* reinforce this point. Neither of these characters is uniquely, or even primarily, signalled as Aboriginal. In this, they cannot be accused of 'tokenism' — they are not present only as bearers of the issue, 'Aboriginality'. On the other hand, certain familiar markers of Aboriginality do form components of their characters, so that charges of assimilationism are not easily sustained.

Dougie, for example, is occasionally employed for his tracking skills — when outsiders get lost in the bush (as they often do). In the episode 'Cries from the Heart' he is called upon to do nothing but serve as a black tracker, co-ordinating the search for a young girl lost in the bush. Were this a feature film, it would be easy to dismiss his character as 'stereotyped', serving the typical role, reinforcing simplistic equations of Aboriginality with tracking skills.

However, this is not Dougie's only appearance in *The Flying Doctors*: the character appears in over a dozen stories, and in the course of these he plays many roles. In 'A Friend of a Friend', for example, he becomes involved in the story by giving a lift to a mad whitefella. Talking to the this man (who will turn out to be a schizophrenic), Dougie reveals himself to be perfectly conversant with the trivia of everyday social skills. He is perceptive (he knows perfectly well there is a problem with the man: 'He's not the full quid'), and it is he who uncovers the visitor's condition, after discovering the man's medication. At one point, when the community is becoming hostile towards the schizophrenic man (some chickens have been killed and there are rumours the 'madman' is responsible), Dougie provides a voice of reason: 'Them chickens were killed by a fox...I found tracks all over the place'. This is the only point in the episode where his bush skills are mentioned, and they are mentioned only in passing.

Dougie, then, plays a variety of narrative roles, not all of which are textually linked to his Aboriginality. The case of Ian Watson's Trevor Jackson is similar. The character is initially introduced to *A Country Practice* as a single-story 'issue'-bearing character, in 'The Dreamkeeper'. Here, he discovers his lost Aboriginal spirituality. However, in Trevor's other stories, his Aboriginality is not always so central. In 'Snakes and Ladders', for example, it is not narratively addressed.

One noteable aspect of Trevor's character is that he tends to be involved in storylines in a professional capacity. This is not an unusual way of implicating characters in narratives: however, in this case, as Trevor is a park ranger, it leads to his often being seen in natural settings. However, any readings of that situation implying a natural Aboriginal relationship with the environment are complicated, not only by Trevor's self-proclaimed inability to find his way around the bush, but also by his repeatedly manifest proclivity to fall over and injure himself in the park, get bitten by wildlife, come down with allergic rashes to native plants, and so on. In 'Snakes and Ladders', his problem is 'contact dermatitis' from rye grass. 'Never had this back in Sydney', he moans: 'I should have been a banker'. In the same story, Trevor's 'Aunty' Rebecca (who is eleven years old) is suspected lost in the bush. All of the adult characters go out to look for her: there is no suggestion that Trev holds any tracking skills which render him particularly useful in this project.

What the continuing narrative of serials offers is the possibility of adopting both of Muecke's strategies — to address Aboriginality as a narrative issue, and to accept it as a narrative given — for a single character. If Trevor is involved in a story about his Aboriginality, it does not necessarily imply that he functions differently from other characters simply because he is Aboriginal; viewers familiar with his role will know that in another story, this will not be the case. Similarly, if in one episode Trevor is not referred to as Aboriginal, this need not imply 'the spectre of assimilation': for his Aboriginality has previously been established, and may be addressed again. The generic limits of serial drama in fact open up the possibilities for interpretation of Aboriginality in particular episodes of these programs.

Conclusion: liminality

For Andrew Jakubowicz et al, describing the place of Aborigines in media representations, the indigenous inhabitants of Australia are positioned 'as true-blue Aussies, but as non-Aussies'; as 'in and out of the nation' (Jakubowicz [ed], 1994: 54, 57). Such a description precisely sums up the place of Aborigines in relation to generically-limited interpretations of

soap opera representation. If it is accepted that central to the work of understanding soap operas is working through a schema of community, interrogating the position of each character in relation to that fictional group, then the place of Aboriginal characters has been consistently ambivalent. Precisely 'in and out', Aboriginal characters have been, like Wesley Patten in *Home and Away*, present in the narrative, but not in the title sequence. Like Kylie Belling in *The Flying Doctors*, they have been allowed strong friendships, but denied romance. Like Brenda Webb in *Neighbours*, they have been involved in single narratives, and then abruptly removed. Looking at the conceptual schema which might emerge from a familiarity with the genre of the soap opera it becomes clear that these characters have in fact been involved in unstable and delicately negotiated positions on the very edge of the community. The 'true-blue Aussies' of these fictional communities can, it seems, neither reject them, nor fully accept them. In this, the liminal place of Aboriginal characters in generically-sensitive interpretations of soap operas function in much the same way as the wider discourses detected by Jakubowicz et al.

This work has gestured towards a history of Aboriginal characters in Australian soap operas. It tries to move beyond simple assertions of 'absence' for these characters. By looking instead at those 'presences' which do exist, it is possible to see a landscape of Australian indigenous representation quite distinct from that rugged skyline marked only by *Jedda*, *Walkabout* and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. Similarly, taking these soap opera representations seriously *as* soap operas allows the importance of contemporary generic discourses to emerge, refusing to engage in sweeping statements which, although they pay token homage to the rebuttal of 'positive' and 'negative' images, still seem quite sure about the best strategies for representing Aboriginality in Australia. This paper offers a schoolteacher in *Neighbours*, a radio operator in *The Flying Doctors*, a prison psychologist in *Prisoner*, and does not begin to insist on their status as stereotypes of otherwise. Finally, it is not necessary to state whether each of them is a 'good' or a 'bad' representation. The impasse which started this paper need not be resolved. The presentation of Trevor Jackson is neither good nor bad. However, refusing such sweeping judgements allows for more careful commentary of these representations. Trevor Jackson is an example of an Australian soap opera tendency to place Aboriginal characters in a peculiarly liminal relationship to the community. In a genre whose norms provide for interpretation of characters to be made precisely in terms of how they fit into the community, Trevor's position is an uncomfortable one. This then is the answer to the question posed in the first paragraph — good? bad? Both. Neither. Rather, 'liminal' provides a description more sensitive to the work done by a generically literate audience with these characters.

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